

Life After Death

Author: Steve Stewart-Williams

Steve Stewart-Williams is with the School of Psychology at Massey University in New Zealand. His main academic interest is the philosophical implications of evolutionary psychology.

Source: *Philosophy Now* magazine, December 2002/January 2003

Reincarnation? Disembodied survival? Resurrection? Steve Stewart-Williams ponders the possible ways in which he could survive his own death, and decides that he doesn't have a ghost of a chance.

Human beings are the only animals on earth who understand they will one day die. This tends not to be knowledge they relish. People throughout history have sought eternal life, most recently pinning this hope on science. But more common than the hope that death can be postponed forever is the hope that life will continue after death. The belief in life after death comes in all shapes and sizes. We can distinguish, for instance, between views involving continued existence in a physical body, and those in which survival takes place outside the body. The first category includes reincarnation, and the Judeo-Christian and Islamic doctrine that God will resurrect our bodies at some future time. Survival outside the physical body is variously conceived as survival in a non-physical body (an astral or ghost body), or survival as a disembodied mind. These conceptions of life after death have in common the fact that the individual person survives in some sense. Another belief is in impersonal survival. Some strains of Buddhism, for instance, hold that the individual mind merges back into a universal mind. And contrasting with all these views is the belief that with death we cease to exist in any sense.

The Case for Survival

The question of whether we survive death is one of the big questions of human life. In this article, I explore some of the arguments and evidence for and against survival. I begin with the case for.

Empirical Evidence for Life after Death

Some of the most convincing evidence for life after death comes from the many stories and reports of paranormal phenomena. Among these allegedly paranormal occurrences are

out-of-body experiences, near-death experiences, ghost sightings, mediums communicating with the dead, and memories of past lives. Such occurrences, if they were what they appear to be, would constitute empirical proof for the belief we survive death (although note that they would not show that we necessarily survive for ever). So, how good is the evidence for paranormal phenomena?

Contrary to the impression the popular media sometimes gives, the evidence is not great. Much of it is easily explained in naturalistic terms. For example, although there are no reasonable grounds to doubt that people sometimes have out-of-body experiences and near-death experiences, these experiences are plausibly explained in physiological and psychological terms. Similarly, memories of past lives may be false memories, and ghost sightings misinterpretations of ambiguous stimuli. These possibilities do not in themselves prove that supernatural explanations are not called for. Nonetheless, wherever there is a plausible alternative explanation for a piece of evidence, we must at least concede that that evidence cannot justify a strong belief in a supernatural explanation. Moreover, some evidence actively undermines the credibility of paranormal explanations. For instance, mediums have been able to contact people who, unknown to them, were fictional or still alive.

But not all alleged paranormal occurrences can be explained in naturalistic terms. We have all heard stories, for example, of deceased relatives returning and conveying information that could not possibly have been gained in other ways. If such things really happen, non-supernatural explanations would simply not be plausible. It should raise our suspicions, however, that the evidence for such unambiguously paranormal occurrences is almost always poorly corroborated or anecdotal. Anecdotal reports are notoriously unreliable, and when reliable scientific methods are instituted, paranormal phenomena tend mysteriously to vanish. So the situation is this: Where there is good evidence for an occurrence (for example, near-death experiences and out-of-body experiences), that occurrence can easily be given a naturalistic explanation; where a naturalistic explanation cannot be given for an occurrence, there tends not to be good evidence for that occurrence suggesting it does not really occur at all. This is precisely the pattern we would expect if there were no reality to paranormal phenomena. In short, there is no good empirical evidence for life after death.

The Conservation of Energy

The search for empirical evidence is not the only attempt to give belief in survival scientific respectability. Some argue that the scientific principle of the conservation of energy supports the idea that the mind survives bodily death. According to this principle, energy never just springs into existence or ceases to exist; it simply changes form. Some argue it

follows from this principle that mind or consciousness cannot just go out of existence or disappear at death. An initial criticism of this argument is that the conservation principle applies only to physical energy. Thus, if mind is viewed as non-physical or spiritual energy, there is no reason to think the conservation principle would apply. Furthermore, even if the mind were a form of physical energy, the principle would not guarantee survival. Though energy never ceases to exist nor comes into existence, it does change form. Thus, if the mind is physical energy, it could eventually transform to the point where we could no longer say the original mind still exists.

But perhaps those deploying this argument really have in mind a more general principle than the conservation of physical energy, such as the simple claim that nothing is created and nothing destroyed. This principle has less scientific credibility, but it may be the only way to salvage the argument. Assuming it is true, which is debatable, would it guarantee the survival of the mind? To begin with, the principle would not apply to aggregate entities things composed of other things. The atoms composing your body, for instance, will continue to exist after your death, but your body will not. Some Buddhist philosophers believed the mind was an aggregate of mental atoms. If so, the dissolution of the mind would not contradict the premise that nothing is created or destroyed, any more than would the fact that a pattern in the sand ceases to exist when scattered by the wind. The premise would only guarantee survival if we could first establish that a mind is a single, indivisible, and indestructible unit. The evidence does not favour this position. Research and clinical practice in neuropsychology shows that when part of the brain is damaged, part of the mind is damaged. This casts doubt on the possibility that the mind is either indivisible or indestructible.

Arguments from Authority

The attempt to link belief in survival to the authority of science has not been successful. There are, however, other authorities to which the believer can appeal. A common argument relies on the authority of numbers. It is often pointed out in defence of the survival hypothesis that the vast majority of human beings have believed in survival. First, it should be emphasised that people have not all believed in the same forms of life after death, which weakens the case. But there is a more decisive response. As Bertrand Russell noted:

The fact that an opinion has been widely held is no evidence whatsoever that it is not utterly absurd. Indeed, in view of the silliness of the majority of mankind, a widespread belief is more likely to be foolish than sensible.

Another approach, then, would be to cite the authority of wise people and prophets of the past, many of whom have believed in life after death. But how do we know such people are

wise? Presumably, if we thought their teachings were completely false, we would not consider them wise. That we do consider them wise shows we already think their teachings are true. If we think they are wise because they hold certain beliefs, we cannot then cite their wisdom as proof for these beliefs. The argument from the authority of wise people does not support belief in life after death; it merely reveals the preexisting beliefs of those who employ the argument.

The Argument from Justice

A very different argument for life after death starts from the observation that if life does not continue after death, there could be no justice. In this world, the innocent suffer, and often the good receive no reward while the bad go unpunished. If this moral imbalance were not balanced, the universe would not be rational. It would be unjust, meaningless and absurd. Therefore, the unfairness of life in this world indicates that life must continue after death, for only if life continues can the scales of justice be balanced.

This argument has a number of implications people typically overlook. First, it does not specify the form that survival will take. It is an equally good argument for karma and reincarnation as it is for the view that God punishes or rewards us with hell or heaven. Thus, this argument alone would not justify any preference between these two views. Second, the argument would support survival of death, but not necessarily immortality. Given that each of our lives is finite, only a finite time would be required to balance the scales of justice. But does the argument even establish temporary survival? Stripped down to its basic form, the argument consists of a premise (if life ends at death, then life would not be fair) and a conclusion (life does not end at death). As it stands, this is not a valid deductive argument; the conclusion does not follow directly from the premise. To make the argument valid, we must include an intermediate premise. The argument in full might then read as follows:

If life ends at death, then life would not be fair.

Life is fair.

Therefore, life does not end at death.

The argument is now valid. The new premise is an implicit assumption that had not been stated previously, but on which the argument depends. However, having made clear the full argument, it is this premise that seems most questionable. It is far from obvious that life is fair, and there is nothing irrational or contradictory about a universe that is unjust by human standards. Unless we have good reason to believe the universe is fair, the justice argument fails.

The Theistic Argument

Some believe, however, that there is good reason to believe the universe is fair. This belief hinges on the existence of God. According to the theistic argument for life after death, an all-good God would not want an unjust universe, and because God is omnipotent, He would be able to create any universe He wanted. Thus, if there were an all-good, omnipotent God, life would be just and fair. The justice argument would then work, establishing life after death as a necessary consequence of the existence of God.

Not everyone is convinced that the existence of God would necessarily mean life is just by our standards, and therefore that we survive death. But again for the sake of discussion, let's assume life after death is a necessary consequence of God's existence. In that case, arguments for God would also be arguments for life after death. (Acceptance of this view comes at a price for the theist: A corollary of the view is that arguments against life after death are also arguments against the existence of God.) There are many arguments attempting to prove God's existence. The majority of thinkers today, however, regard these as failing to achieve their goal. But even supposing they do establish the existence of God, before we can take this as proof of life after death, we must ask: Do they establish the existence of an all-good, all-powerful God? For it is only if God has these traits that we can have any assurance the universe is fair, and thus that life continues after death.

Most of the best-known arguments for God establish some attributes of the deity, but not those that would make life after death a logical necessity. For example, the argument from intelligent design, if sound, would establish the existence of a designer, but would not show that this designer is omnipotent or infinitely good. Similarly, the first cause argument demonstrates, at best, that there must have been a first cause, but does not say anything about any other characteristics this would possess. In assessing the possibility of life after death, we do not even need to consider whether these arguments are sound. Even if they were, they would not establish survival. Of course, there are other arguments believers may claim fit the bill. This is not the place to deal with the question of the existence of God. But that is not to say we have reached an impasse, or that the question of life after death must remain open until we have investigated every argument for God. On the contrary, we can continue to investigate the issue of survival, for in doing so we can chip away at the theistic argument from another direction. As noted earlier, if we accept the view that arguments for God are also arguments for survival, we must also accept that arguments against survival are also arguments against the existence of God. Such arguments, to the extent they are sound, will further weaken the theistic argument. It is to these arguments we now turn.

The Case against Survival

There are a number of arguments against survival. Here I propose to look only at some of the more important.

Wishful Thinking

First, let us dispose of an invalid, though common, argument against life after death: the wishful thinking argument. It is sometimes argued that the sole reason people believe in life after death is that they find the idea comforting. The belief in survival can remove or at least lessen the fear of death and extinction, the sadness experienced when a loved one dies, and the sense that a life of finite duration would be meaningless. It also holds out the promise that the scales of justice will be balanced. The comfort this belief provides can completely explain why people hold it. There are no other reasons to believe, and thus we can assume the belief is false.

An immediate criticism of this argument is that the belief in life after death is not always comforting: Millions have lived in fear of hell and eternal damnation, or other frightening post-mortem possibilities. But this criticism is actually beside the point. It is possible to invent ulterior motives to explain why people hold any belief. But even if a person does believe it for the reason suggested, this does not in any way show that the belief is false. It is, after all, possible to hold correct beliefs for the wrong reasons.

Furthermore, believers in life after death could use exactly the same argument against non-believers. Some people may welcome the idea of personal extinction at death, because it promises the cessation of the misery and unsatisfied yearning we experience in life. Some non-believers have suggested life without a body would be dull and pointless, and Nietzsche thought belief in another life after this one diminishes this life. On these grounds, it could be argued that the belief in extinction at death is mere wishful thinking. The wishful thinking argument can thus be used to attack either point of view. Consequently, it does not advantage either side of the debate, and we should completely ignore it. Of course, if we have other reasons to think one or other view is false, then we might speculate about why people hold this view despite its falsity. Such speculation cannot, however, be used to argue a view is false in the first place.

The Dependence of Mind on Brain

We turn now from a weak argument to perhaps the strongest argument against survival: the claim that mind is dependent on the brain. If it could be established that minds cannot exist without brains, this would undermine not only the possibility of survival outside the body, but most other survival theories as well. For example, some believers in resurrection hold that the mind continues to exist between the moment of death and the resurrection of

the body by God. But this would not be possible if minds could only exist when coupled with working brains. Similarly, believers in reincarnation are committed to the view that the same mind that inhabited one body comes to inhabit another; however, this would require the continued existence of a mind without a brain between incarnations. The possibility of impersonal survival or a universal mind would also be ruled out by the dependence of mind on brain (unless we wish to claim the physical universe is one large brain).

Clearly, the dependence of mind on brain would be devastating to the survival hypothesis. So, what is the evidence for and against this position? We have already considered the evidence against it. Paranormal phenomena, such as ghost activity and medium contact with the deceased, suggest minds exist without brains. As argued, however, this evidence is weak. Furthermore, we must weigh it against the evidence of neuroscience, which points to the opposite conclusion. And this evidence is strong, abundant, and well replicated. The guiding assumption of neuroscience is that for every mental state, there is a corresponding brain state. Literally thousands of studies have vindicated this assumption.

Neuroscientists have shown, for example, that when you look at something when you have a conscious visual experience certain parts of your brain become more active. If you then close your eyes and imagine the same visual scene, the same parts of your brain are again active. If you electrically stimulate the visual areas of the brain, this produces conscious visual experience. Stimulating other sensory areas produces other sensory experiences. Other things that influence brain states, such as drugs, also influence states of mind. Neuroscientists are making great progress finding the neural bases of perception, memory, attention, thought, emotion, motivation, and indeed of all psychological phenomena. Some might argue that this shows only that mental activity and brain activity go hand-in-hand in living human beings, but not that mental events can only occur in conjunction with a brain. One piece of evidence in particular answers this challenge: When part of the brain is destroyed, part of the mind is destroyed. Surely it is reasonable to assume that when the brain is completely destroyed, so too is the mind. David Hume summed it up well several centuries ago, when he wrote: The weakness of the body and that of the mind in infancy are exactly proportioned; their vigour in manhood, their sympathetic disorder in sickness, their common gradual decay in old age. The step further seems unavoidable; their common dissolution in death.

Resurrection

The dependence of mind on brain rules out survival outside the body, reincarnation, and impersonal survival. There is, however, one form of survival that would not be affected by the dependence of mind on brain: the resurrection of our current bodies by God. Again,

this is not the place to go into the question of Gods existence. However, we can ask whether, even if God does exist, resurrection could be possible. If it is a logical impossibility then we can rule it out, God or no God. A well-known criticism of the idea that God literally resurrects our current bodies is illustrated by the cannibal problem. When a cannibal eats another person, the matter of his meals body is incorporated into his own. How can God then resurrect both the cannibals body and the body of the person he ate? The problem does not apply only to cannibals and their victims. The atoms of your body today may have been atoms in the bodies of other people in the past, and may be atoms in other peoples bodies in the future. How can we all be resurrected?

One suggestion is that God will rebuild us from other atoms. But surely these new bodies would not actually be us at all, but rather would be replicas. Consider what would happen if God created you from different atoms now, while you were still alive. You would consider this a copy, and not actually you. It would have another brain albeit one almost identical to your own and thus would have another mind, to which you would not have direct access. It appears, then, that the replica version of resurrection cannot secure survival anymore than the original version.

Conclusion

Earlier I suggested that only after we have good reason to reject a belief should we speculate about why people may hold that belief, despite its falsity. We have now seen good reasons to reject the possibility of survival. So, by way of a conclusion, I will briefly touch on the issue of why people might hold this belief. Wishful thinking and other psychosocial factors probably provide a partial explanation. However, we should not overlook more obvious explanations, such as that most people believe in survival simply because they were told when young that we survive, and in day-to-day life we experience little that contradicts this view. And there is another factor that may be relevant, one that has received little if any attention. This relates to the limits of what is conceivable. We cannot imagine nothingness, and thus cannot imagine our own non-existence. Consequently, it may come very naturally to us to believe our minds continue to exist after death. Regardless of how naturally it comes, however, there seems little reason to think it is true.